



C. Questions specific to performance pay

Does evidence suggest that teachers behave differently in schools that reward individual teachers rather than the entire school for gains in student achievement? Are they more competitive and less collaborative, as is commonly believed?

Incentive plans for teachers are receiving increasing attention as a strategy to recruit and retain teachers and improve student achievement. Critics fear, however, that disadvantages of these programs may outweigh their benefits, especially if they are poorly designed. Among such fears is the concern that incentive plans could negatively affect school culture by creating a competitive work environment and decreasing teacher collaboration.

According to Le Blanc and Mulvey (1998), most American workers will state that they prefer to be compensated on the basis of individual performance rather than group performance. Kuhn and Yockey (2003) replicated these findings, revealing a strong preference for variable pay contingent on individual performance instead of team performance. With respect to teacher preferences, research has shown that teachers and future teachers often prefer to be rewarded on the basis of their students' performance rather than schoolwide performance because they have more influence over the results (Kuhn & Yockey, 2003; Bretz & Judge, 1994; cited in Milanowski, 2006). College students participating in focus groups in one study expressed concerns about several things, including free riders who do not put forth maximum effort but receive the same rewards as others; potential pay raises based upon the performance of unknown colleagues; and fairness of incentive programs in low-performing schools (Milanowski, 2006).

Kuhn and Yockey point out that, "the tension between rewarding employees as individuals and encouraging teamwork and organizational citizenship behavior has long been recognized" (p. 338). For this reason, many organizational researchers are deeply opposed to individual incentive plans (Pfeffer, 1998). The alternative to individual rewards is often group incentives, which some research shows is preferential for workers (Gomez-Mejia & Balkin, 1989; Cable & Judge, 1994; Kirkman & Shapiro, 2000). Whether this preference is due to disinterest in individualized pay or frustration with existing models has not been definitively answered.

Although a common objection is that individualized incentive plans for teachers could have a negative impact on a school's culture by encouraging teachers to withhold information and assistance and to engage in other counterproductive behaviors, the research base supporting this theory is thin. As Keys and Dee (2005) note, the possibility exists that "merit pay systems may discourage cooperation among teachers or otherwise foster a demoralizing and unproductive work environment" (p. 62). Murnane and Cohen (1986) did find that older merit pay plans often interfered with leadership team-building efforts. However, more recent evidence from a survey of teachers found that individual incentive programs did not lead to decreased collaboration (Barnett, Ritter, Winters, & Greene, 2007).

Further research is needed to determine how differences in the designs of various incentive programs affect teacher collaboration and competition. Pay plans that arbitrarily cap the number of teachers who can receive an award are probably more likely to increase competitive behaviors than open-ended plans which allow all teachers to earn awards if they meet the qualification criteria. Teachers generally prefer open-ended plans, but it is more difficult for program administrators to estimate and control costs if all teachers could potentially earn incentive pay. Additional research on any adverse effects of individual teacher pay plans on school climate and collaboration could help education leaders more accurately assess the relative advantages and disadvantages of these options.

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